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# **“I can’t understand what you guys are talking about!”: Active Learning and the recognition of language, relationships and skills as legitimate areas for teacher intervention.**

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Based on a phenomenological exploration of international students’ experiences at a UK university business school (Simpson 2014), this article supports the use of Active Learning pedagogies to promote the creation of action-centred educational environments for all students. It also supports a growing body of research which questions the dichotomous assumptions that have tended to overplay a putative Socratic/Confucian continuum of academic cultures. However, the study also finds that for some Chinese students, the ‘double learning agenda’ entailed by these pedagogies can make their classrooms an uncomfortable space. The conclusion makes a strong case for reconceptualising the ‘language problems’ of many international students as ‘conversational problems’ which can be overcome by recognising the nexus of language, relationships and meta-cognitive skills as legitimate areas for intervention by teachers in their role as facilitators of Active Learning.

**Keywords:** Constructivist pedagogies; Active Learning; group work; language; relationships; skills

## **Introduction**

Constructivist pedagogies, including Active Learning, are interpreted variously as being underpinned by social constructionism (Gergen, 1995, 2009) or constructivism (Savery and Duffy, 2001; Duffy and Jonassen, 1992), and are sometimes associated with progressive pedagogies (Bernstein, 2000) or action learning (Revans, 1998). However all interpretations contrast Active Learning with more traditional, teacher-centred pedagogies which imply the transmission and recall of knowledge from teacher to student. Originally adopted in medical schools to train doctors to develop problem-solving and diagnostic skills (West, 1966), Problem-Based Learning and other constructivist pedagogies have been developed in many business schools (Stinson and Milner, 1996) in order to provide opportunities for students to develop practical skills which can be applied in real world situations.

Examples of Active Learning approaches include: Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) (Bache and Hayton, 2012; Waddell and McChlery, 2008; Tiwari *et al.*, 2006; Dochy *et al.*, 2005; Nijhuis *et al.*, 2005; Waters and Johnston, 2004; Steinemann, 2003; Savery and Duffy, 2001; Stinson and Milner, 1996); Cooperative student projects (Plastow *et al.*, 2010; Higgins and Li, 2008; Strauss and U, 2007); case studies (Heriot *et al.*, 2008; Danford, 2006); and simulations (Takahaisha and Saito, 2011; Salas *et al.*, 2009; Polito *et al.*, 2004). What all of these pedagogical approaches have in common is that each of them aims to create an indeterminate, loosely structured learning environment which challenges the learner to make sense of complex problems by formulating good questions and appropriate strategies, usually in collaboration with other learners.

The social constructionist theoretical perspective underpinning Active Learning has practical implications for both teachers and students, not least of which is the flattening of the hierarchical relationship between the two. For example, the role of the teacher might be seen as 'coordinator, facilitator, or resource adviser, that is, as one who enables students to marshal resources' (Gergen, 1995: 32). This diffusion of the authority of the teacher and the consequent empowering of the student might be perceived as liberating by confident students with well-developed independent learning skills. However, it could equally be somewhat uncomfortable for students with expectations of more traditional teacher roles, for whom the 'freedom' of the student to 'establish the contours' (Gergen, 1995: 32) of their curriculum might be felt as a burden rather than a liberation. Students' expectations of teacher roles are therefore likely to be an important influence on their experience of these pedagogies.

Several authors (e.g. Kirschner *et al.*, 2006; Dick, 1992; Perkins, 1992) are critical of how little discussion is devoted to the demands made on the learners, to the learners' diverse backgrounds and to the expected learning outcomes of constructivist pedagogies. These aspects might be regarded as particularly significant in mixed-nationality classes, where linguistic difficulties as well as cognitive and cultural barriers might represent important obstacles to the effectiveness of these pedagogies.

Based on evidence from qualitative interviews carried out for the author's thesis (Simpson, 2014), this article explores the potential disjunction between learner expectations and pedagogic approaches by considering the experiences of a specific group of international students (all Chinese) on modules identified by their tutors as underpinned by Active Learning pedagogies.

### **Active Learning and the Confucian/Socratic continuum**

There is abundant evidence to show that most students, regardless of their national origin, tend to adapt quickly to new pedagogical styles (Hall and Sung, 2009; Higgins and Li, 2009; Jones, 2005), including: Problem-Based-Learning (Pearson *et al.*, 2007; Stokes, 2001); Active Learning techniques such as group activities, role play, case analysis and debate (Liu, 2008); communicative language teaching (Stanley, 2011); knowledge-building (Chan, 2009); constructivist approaches (Chan, 2001); and cooperative and interactive teaching approaches (Marton *et al.* 2009). This evidence suggests that earlier research which contrasted 'Western' and 'Confucian' learning styles might have overstated the dichotomy (Ryan and Louie, 2007) and thereby exaggerated the scale of the challenges facing Chinese students in international educational settings. Whilst providing examples of positive experiences of the use of innovative pedagogies in intercultural classes, the authors cited here also demonstrate the potential of research designs which avoid foregrounding cultural differences or other interpretations based on deficit. Nevertheless, despite the numerous examples of positive experiences recounted by these authors, other research refers to the difficulties which some teachers have experienced in integrating Chinese and non-Chinese students on collaborative activities such as group projects and simulations.

Several reasons are offered for this, including individual (often linguistic, but also psychological), institutional or cultural causes. I examine these in turn in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, the individual characteristics of students, as opposed to macro-scale categories such as nationality, ethnic origin or culture, are highlighted by several authors as determining the experiences of individual students. For example, Gieve and Clark (2005) interpret differences in responses to academic programmes between Chinese and European students as related to individual differences in language ability and previous knowledge of the subject. However, Gu (2011) focusses more on the importance of personal attributes, and criticises research which has tended to use objectivist methods to investigate students' psychological adjustment to study abroad, whilst ignoring their individual maturation and human development factors, including aspirations, motivation, contextual factors and relationships between students and teachers. Gu also highlights the importance of identity change over time, which is invisible in most of the intercultural comparison studies. Similarly, Vansteenkiste *et al.* (2005) relate the success of international sojourns to the study motivation of individual students, influenced by non-academic outcomes such as well-being and vitality, concluding that definitions of the educational context need to be porous and inclusive of the broader, life-related issues of individuals if researchers are to make sense of students' experiences. Burnapp and Zhao (2011) also discuss the differences amongst students on so-called 'top-up' courses, especially between those students who have followed UK-style Higher National Diploma courses in China and those who have followed Chinese college diploma courses, finding that the former benefit from extensive previous exposure to a UK-validated course taught entirely in English. Clearly all of these authors put great emphasis on the importance of individual attributes and contextual factors when attempting to understand the experiences of Chinese students.

A second group of researchers relate students' experiences to the institutional choices which govern course design and assessment, and recommend various structural changes to address these problems. These include the retraining of staff to provide them with the skills to work more effectively with an increasingly international student population and the redesigning of learning and assessment materials to make them more suitable (Higgins and Li, 2009; Brown, 2007; Case and Selvester, 2000). Higgins and Li argue that much 'inter-cultural' project work in classrooms fails to integrate students since different types of students have different expectations. They contrast the resentment felt by many of the British students ('reluctant hosts') with the positive feelings expressed by many Chinese students, who felt they greatly benefited from the help of their non-Chinese partners, and recommend a 'reorientation of problem definition' so that cultural awareness is explicitly required of all students involved in collaborative projects. This is a design solution aimed at avoiding the perceptions of many home students that internationalisation is a problem and that their Chinese group mates are part of that problem. 'Under this revised format students would need to explain how they had considered each other's viewpoints and adopted international or comparative approaches to the task under consideration' (Higgins and

Li, 2009: 65). Harrison and Peacock (2010) confirm the disjunction between the 'internationalisation at home' policy agenda and the perceptions of home students using Integrated Threat Theory to investigate the nature of the resentment felt by many home students toward their international peers. Furthermore, whilst Arkoudis *et al.* (2013) advocate specific curricular solutions to enhance the interaction between domestic and international students, Devlin and Peacock (2009) recommend that university institutions should take a more active role in creating spaces for intercultural interaction to occur outside the classroom, although they acknowledge the constraints in managing such top-down initiatives. Concerning the support mechanisms usually provided by host universities, Smith and Zhou (2009) found that many Chinese students regarded them as too specialised, and contrasted this with the more diffused provision in China, where there was 'a door which they could knock on at any time for any help' (Smith and Zhou, 2009: 141). Regarding the language support service provided by many universities for international students, Sloan and Porter (2008) recommend that this should be embedded in academic courses rather than bolted on as a separate (and optional) service. In sum, all of these authors find that universities need to adapt their structures and practices to meet the needs of their international students, with some diversity of views over the precise location of the institutional shortcomings.

A third approach is characterised by its stress on cultural explanations. Much of the earlier work on Chinese learners (e.g. Ho, 2001; Kember, 2001; Watkins and Biggs, 2001, 1996; Lee, 1996; Marton *et al.*, 1996; Tang, 1996) stressed the need for 'Western' researchers and teachers to develop a better grasp of Chinese culture and Confucian traditions more generally, in order to understand 'the paradox of the Chinese learner', which consisted in the ability of Chinese learners to outperform their 'Western' counterparts in many academic disciplines despite studying in what might be described as impoverished conditions by 'Western' standards. These traditions included: 'Confucian conceptions of learning' (Lee, 1996); 'Chinese cultures of learning' (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996); the specifically 'Chinese function of memorisation' (Marton *et al.*, 1996); and 'spontaneous collaboration' amongst Chinese students (Tang, 1996). Following this tendency, certain authors find that cultural factors pose important challenges to Chinese students in international learning contexts. For example, Brown (2008) investigates the reasons why some students find it very difficult to make contributions to seminar discussions despite having near native fluency in English and puts this down to 'academic cultural differences', concluding that 'academic success is impeded by poor language skills, yet linguistic competence alone will not guarantee adjustment' (Brown, 2008: 23). Similarly, Liu (2008) found that although Chinese postgraduate marketing students appeared to appreciate what she calls the 'Western active learning approaches', they responded better to structured pedagogies which were 'deeply rooted in their national culture and heavily influenced by Confucianism' (Liu, 2008: 39). Stanley (2011) also finds some support for this contention in the work of Hu (2002) and Greenholtz (2003), who argue that pedagogies are only effective to the extent that teachers and students have been 'socialised' into them.

A number of studies show that personal, institutional and cultural factors are situated phenomena, which are foregrounded in multiple ways depending on the perspective of the subject. For example, Hall and Sung (2010) highlight the differences between the perceptions of international students and their lecturers regarding the major challenges faced by students in collaborative coursework. Other authors (Zhao and Bourne, 2011; Zhou *et al.*, 2011; Brown, 2007) also identify asymmetrical expectations between international students and lecturers as a source of problems in postgraduate supervisory relationships. Parris-Kidd and Barnett (2011) advocate the use of a 'cultures of learning' framework designed to facilitate open discussion of cultural distance in mixed-nationality classrooms with a view to bridging the perceived gaps between academic cultures.

Other researchers focus on specific activities in which students struggle. For example, Clark *et al.*, (2007) found that neither staff nor students were adequately prepared for collaborative pedagogies, and stress the need for universities to develop a 'consistent philosophy for collaborative learning assignments that is understood by all lecturers' (Clark *et al.*, 2007: 9). Similarly, whilst generally supportive of collaborative projects, Strauss and U (2007: 158) warn that these need to be carefully designed and students prepared with 'both the requisite academic and socio-cultural skills to undertake them successfully'. Looking more carefully at the specific problems encountered by some students in group work, Littlewood (2009) identifies the problem of 'premature closure', where 'members are reluctant to disagree with each other's views, lack motivation, or simply, for some extraneous reason such as tiredness, find it more convenient to stop the discussion early' (Littlewood, 2009: 213).

From these authors it can be seen that collaborative work in mixed-nationality groups raises a wide range of problems, including linguistic and cultural barriers, resentment on the part of some home students, the poor design of group projects and staff training needs. This study did not aim to cover all of these issues comprehensively, but it aimed to capture their complexity and interrelatedness as situated phenomena rather than isolating them as specific problems. The initial questions of this study were therefore:

1. How do interviewees describe their experiences on modules which use Active Learning pedagogies at a UK business school?
2. How effective do they consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in supporting their learning on these modules?

## **The research method and findings**

The choice of an inductive, phenomenological approach for this study was strongly influenced by the attempts of recent researchers to reject the dichotomous and

reductive frameworks of much of the earlier literature on international students by using a wider range of research approaches. The empirical basis of this study (see Table 1) is taken from a qualitative analysis of transcripts of recorded interviews conducted with 24 Chinese students on various Business Management courses at a UK university during 2011 and 2012.

Table 1: Interview metadata

Participant	Date of interview	FHEQ Level at time of interview	Student's major subject	Time living in UK at time of interview
<b>Pre-pilot Phase: April and May 2011</b>				
CS1 (F)	5/4/11 (first group interview)	UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS2 (F)		UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS3 (M)		UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS4 (M)		UG 6	BA Int'l Business	32 months
CS5 (F)	20/5/11 (second group interview)	PG 7	MBA	32 months
CS6 (F)		UG 6	BA Int'l Business	20 months
CS7 (M)		UG 6	BA Strategy	8 months
<b>Pilot Phase: June 2011</b>				
CS8 (M)	9/6/11	UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS9 (F)	27/6/11	PG 7	MBA	20 months
<b>Main Interviews: October to November 2011</b>				
CS10 (M)	18/10/11	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	14 months
CS11 (M)	24/10/11 (paired interview)	UG 6	BA Finance	14 months
CS12 (M)		UG 6	BA Finance	14 months
CS13 (F)	25/10/11	PG 7	MBA	14 months
CS14 (M)	25/10/11	PG 7	MBA	26 months
CS15 (F)	26/10/11	UG 6	BA Business	26 months
CS16 (M)	26/10/11	UG 6	BA Management	26 months
CS17 (F)	3/11/11	PG 7	MBA	26 months
CS18 (M)	11/11/11	PG 7	MBA	15 months
CS19 (F)	1/12/11	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	15 months
CS20 (F)	18/10/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 5	BA Management	15 months
CS21 (F)	28/11/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	4 months
CS22 (M)	2/12/11 (in Mandarin)	PG 7	MBA	28 months
CS23 (M)	5/12/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	4 months
CS24 (M)	8/12/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 5	BA Finance	5 months
<b>Summary</b>				
<b>Males: 13 Females: 11 (CS=Chinese student)</b>	<b>Pre-pilot: 2 group interviews Pilot: 2 individual interviews Main: 1 paired and 13 individual interviews (of which 5 in Mandarin)</b>	<b>Undergraduate: L5=2, L6=15, Postgraduate: L7=7</b>	<b>Various Business Management programmes</b>	<b>&lt; 1 year: 4 1 – 2 years:13 &gt;2years: 7</b>

Interviewing took place in three phases, with the first phase (pre-pilot) consisting of two group interviews during which certain topics emerged as particularly salient in the students' accounts of their experiences on modules which were identified as employing Active Learning pedagogies, including PBL, business simulations and above all, group projects. An open-ended interviewing technique was used which provided a broad phenomenological framework based on Van Manen's (1990) 'existential themes' (temporality, relationality, corporeality and spatiality). The specific topics mentioned in these group interviews were then piloted in two individual semi-structured qualitative interviews before being explored in more detail in individual



interviews, nine of which were conducted in English and five in Chinese. Interview questions used in the main interviews were as follows:

- Before arriving in the UK, what did you think that being a student here would be like?
- What do you consider to be the greatest opportunities and challenges of studying here?
- What would you say are the main differences between studying in China and studying in the UK?
- Tell me about your experiences on the modules which involve [Active Learning pedagogies] simulations, group projects, investigative studies etc.
- Which aspects of these modules do you find most difficult?
- Which aspects did you find most satisfying?
- How well do you think you understand/ understood what is/was required of you on these modules?
- How do you know when work on these modules is going well?
- How effective do you consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in supporting your learning of the subject on these modules?
- What other skills (apart from subject knowledge) do you think you have developed on these modules?
- Do you feel you would learn these skills on modules with more traditional teaching, learning and assessment approaches?
- If you were asked to recommend changes to the teaching, learning and assessment at the Business School, what would you recommend? Why?

The transcripts from all three phases were summarised and sent to students for approval before being entered on qualitative data analysis software (NVivo, version 9) for analysis using open and axial coding techniques. In this way data were obtained from all 24 participants. All recordings were listened to several times before analysis in order not to 'force the data' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or miss the contexts within which comments were made. The three major themes around which most of the accounts converged were: working in a foreign language; relationships with other students and with teachers; and the skills developed in Active Learning contexts. These three themes are discussed in turn.

All but two participants talked about language as a great difficulty, problem or barrier in the performance of Active Learning tasks. However, on further examination, it became clear that many of these 'language problems' were related either to the causes and consequences of language problems e.g. paucity of speaking opportunities, shyness, fear of making errors, or to aspects of the process of communication, such as the inability to understand home students in group tasks, as illustrated by the following comment:

'It was four English students and I was the only Chinese student. As I told you, there were language issues. They kind of refused to talk to me because when they were talking to each other they really talked fluently and really fast so I could not keep up with them. So when they were discussing things, I'm like: no, I can't understand what you guys are talking about. So I couldn't add my opinion to the group and they ignored me for that. I tried to talk to them, and they just said: pardon, say that again, which really made me feel offended. That was kind of negative.' (CS13)

For some students, the assumption that they would have problems understanding, and therefore working with non-Chinese students, made them feel afraid of joining mixed-nationality groups. It was therefore important to consider language issues as overlapping and related to the other two experiential dimensions (relationships and skills) since for some students, language competence not only enabled them to understand the information presented to them, but formed part of a mutually reinforcing nexus of social and pragmatic elements which led to either positive or negative learning experiences.

Eleven students were able to give examples of extensive interactions with native English speakers including teachers, friends, neighbours and landlords, and these students seemed to think that their speaking competence in English was related to the frequency of available opportunities to practise their language with native speakers. Conversely, in some classes where Chinese students were a majority or a significant proportion of the total, or where certain home students felt reluctant to work with them, paucity of speaking opportunities was blamed for their lack of progress in English language:

‘At least if the group has English students or other countries’ students ... at least the Chinese students will not speak Chinese, or will not often speak Chinese ... and they will improve their language skills and communication skills.’ (CS16)

There is also evidence that some Chinese students carefully avoided joining mixed-nationality groups for reasons related to personal or social preferences, and they offered various justifications for this behaviour, including: ease of communication; the need to tap into other Chinese students’ specialist knowledge of Chinese business cases; or the difficulty of adapting to local social norms.

In summary, most of the students talked about language as a difficulty or challenge, but many of these problems overlapped with other experiences such as understanding lectures, completing assignment tasks or relating to and collaborating with other (non-Chinese) students. For this reason it would be misleading to isolate language issues as a separate category of phenomena since this might give the impression that a solution to these problems would be more language teaching. It would seem reasonable then to consider language use at least partly in terms of its enabling or disabling effect on the relationships students need to establish for successful collaborative learning in Active Learning classes.

On the subject of relationships between students and teachers, nineteen out of the twenty-four participants made comments which were clearly related to their experience in the classroom. Metaphors for teacher roles were either explicitly used (friends and parents) or strongly implied (facilitators and transmitters) by the interviewees themselves. These last two roles are also frequently used to contrast Active Learning and traditional (teacher-centred) pedagogies (Tiberius, 1986; Meyers and Jones, 1993; Stinson and Milter, 1996).

Some interviewees made a strong distinction between the roles or styles of teachers in the UK and China whilst others thought that teacher roles were not that

different, or that they were linked more to the personality of the teacher than to their national culture. There was also considerable diversity in the degree of importance students attributed to their relationships with teachers. Other important factors mentioned included the effort and attitudes of individual students and their competence in English. However, even students who reported poor experiences agreed that this relationship was an important element. This variety of perceptions concerning relationships between teachers and students lends support to research approaches which challenge the use of national culture as an appropriate determinant in qualitative investigations of educational experience. Certain researchers (e.g. Leung and Crisp, 2011; Cortazzi *et al.*, 2009; Jin and Cortazzi, 2011) do this by using cognitive linguistics, particularly metaphors and metonymy, to identify individual conceptualisations of learning and teacher roles.

Most of the comments on the theme of relationships with other students concerned experiences of group work and therefore highlighted the situatedness of these relationships within the classroom context. Three relational aspects (social interaction, language issues and collaborative task completion) emerged as dominant themes in students' comments and highlighted the ways in which group work could be seen both as fulfilling the expectations of some students that it would lead to greater opportunities for social interaction with other students, and at the same time as facing some other students with almost insurmountable relational challenges where they had poor experiences of working with non-Chinese students. Likewise, group work offered opportunities to improve language skills and obtain language help from other students, but it also pushed some students beyond the limits of their linguistic competence by requiring them to negotiate or plan their work with other students. Finally, the combination of positive or poor interactional experiences and surmountable or insurmountable linguistic challenges led to either satisfactory or poor completion of group work tasks.

The third major theme emerging from these interviews was the skills related to both the processes and outcomes of Active Learning, particularly the collaborative tasks in business simulations and group projects. Difficulties with certain group work processes clearly influenced some students' general perception of the appropriateness or effectiveness of Active Learning pedagogies on their course. In cases where cooperation among group members was successful, all students seemed to be fully involved in the processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation. In contrast to these, other students were clearly disconnected from the group task and ignored by their fellow group members, sometimes being asked to carry out individual tasks as agreed by more dominant group members, but having no input into those group work processes which required advanced negotiation skills. An important finding here was that students' appreciation of Active Learning pedagogies was related to the degree to which they provided opportunities to develop certain skills, particularly intercultural competence, teamwork and negotiation skills.

Whilst some students had found group work challenging and rewarding, for others the complexity of the task was baffling, either because of the way their groups divided group tasks into individual parts, or because the relational dynamics of the

group had left them feeling excluded. Interaction with other group members was obviously an important element of students' experience of group work and their linguistic ability and confidence in building positive relationships were important elements in shaping this interaction. By focussing on the separate group work processes, it could be seen that students who were fully involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating had more positive experiences than those who seemed to be largely concerned with task achievement. This was particularly true where participation was reduced to the completion of individual tasks, which left certain individuals only partially involved in the monitoring and evaluation processes.

One recommendation that can be drawn from these findings is that group tasks need to be carefully designed to incorporate genuine collaborative activity, as recommended by several researchers (Plastow *et al.*, 2010; Higgins and Li, 2009; Strauss and U, 2007), rather than merely consisting of a larger assignment that can be broken down and put back together in the final stage by one of the group members who has a coordinating role. Another recommendation is that tutors should spend time coaching students in group work processes so that they understand the nature of full participation in collaborative activity and see this as the correct way to complete group assignments. Discussion of the processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation might also help students to avoid premature closure of the task and engage effectively in all group work processes.

### **The language/relationships/skills nexus**

In response to the first research question of this study, most participants described their experiences of Active Learning in positive terms and many welcomed the opportunities which these pedagogies provided to develop their intercultural competence through working together with non-Chinese students. The challenge of working in a foreign language was another frequently discussed, if predictable, topic, and interviewees offered useful information about how their language skills left them better or worse equipped to tackle the challenges of building good working relationships with their group members and of completing collaborative tasks.

A further finding related to this question was that, although most students found important differences between their experiences of studying in China and their experiences in the UK, there was no consistent picture of what might be called a Chinese or Confucian style of education. Some students had already encountered activities typical of Active Learning pedagogies such as simulations and group assignments before they came to the UK, and explained this by stating that many of their teachers in China had studied abroad themselves or were interested in alternatives to traditional teacher-centred pedagogies. Indeed many of the teachers in their Chinese universities were themselves from outside China and they tended to use constructivist teaching styles. It could be argued therefore that the perceived cultural divide between "Confucian" and "Western" educational traditions has been, and is still being, eroded by the rapid internationalisation of education (see also Yang, [2009];

Cheng and Xu, [2011]; and Liu, [2011] on the presumed dichotomy between 'Chinese' and 'Western' pedagogic discourse).

The second aim of this study was to explore how students responded to what Perkins (1992) calls the 'double-learning agenda' of Active Learning, that is, how these pedagogic approaches supported their learning. In fact these interviews confirm that most students took the pedagogy in their stride and positively appreciated the way it attempted to provide realistic (i.e. 'messy') management situations through which they could develop practical managerial skills. Additionally, some students commented that studying in the UK had helped them to develop independent learning skills, although these were sometimes the result of living and studying abroad and not exclusively linked to their experiences in the classroom. For others, these modules had given them the opportunity to develop cross-cultural skills and they saw this as a valuable asset for their chances of finding work after graduation. Some students also gave a clear indication that Active Learning had contributed to their awareness of higher cognitive skills development, although there was some variation in their ability to express this using the highly conceptual language associated with these skills. However, close analysis confirmed that students' metacognitive theories were mostly informal and based on either cultural traditions or their own observations. Since several authors (e.g. Zhang and Sirinthorn, 2012; Pifarre and Cobos, 2010; Tolhurst, 2007) indicate links between students' metacognitive skills and their performance in problem-solving tasks, it seems reasonable to recommend that more should be done to help students to develop their awareness of these skills.

In light of this exploration of student accounts of their experiences on modules underpinned by Active Learning pedagogies, it appears that any assumption that innovative pedagogies presented Chinese students with special problems due to their previous educational experiences would be difficult to sustain. This assumption overplays the dichotomy between academic cultures and underestimates the degree of adaptability of students. However, perhaps more importantly, this study has identified some significant aspects of student experience which demonstrate that the full potential of Active learning pedagogies is not always realised in practice.

## **Conclusions**

Most students offered generally favourable opinions of the way the learning and assessment activities allowed them to apply theories to practice, to deal with realistic management problems, and to develop valuable team working skills, including those required for successful intercultural communication. However, this generally positive view of the efficacy of Active Learning is clouded by a number of the comments which revealed that many students failed to participate fully in group work activities and often felt excluded from significant processes related to planning, monitoring and evaluating the contributions of individual group members. Since language difficulties, poor relationships and variable metacognitive skills contributed significantly to this experience of exclusion, it is worth reflecting on how these components can be

conceptualised as legitimate areas for intervention by teachers *qua* facilitators of active learning.

Active Learning pedagogies rely heavily on the ability of students to negotiate meanings by evaluating conceptual frameworks and choosing appropriate practical strategies with other students and with tutors. Emphasising the participatory element of Social Construction, Shotter (1993: 39) uses the term 'joint action' to describe the process by which individuals collaboratively construct their 'conversational realities', and alludes to the ways in which people may feel excluded by being unable to participate in this process. This is reminiscent of what many participants in this study said about their experiences of group work. They sometimes referred to the difficulties they had in communicating with other group members as 'language problems', but some of the issues they described (e.g. certain students dominating the task; the division of group work leading to individualised tasks) were clearly more complex and could be more broadly conceptualised, using Shotter's terms, as 'conversational problems' which resulted in their inability to participate in 'joint action' as required by Active Learning pedagogies. A challenge for many teachers would be how to recognise and remedy the occurrence of these 'conversational problems'.

This notion of conversational realities has implications for teacher interventions both in the students' home institutions before their arrival in the UK, and in their host institutions in mixed-nationality classrooms. In order to support international students before their arrival in the UK to become confident conversational users of language, language teaching needs be aimed at preparing students to deal with the kinds of complex and unpredictable situations they are likely to meet in Active Learning classrooms. This could be summed up as a conversational approach, which recognises that in addition to mastering the ability to use language in well defined and predictable situations, students need to be given opportunities to develop advanced rhetorical and responsive skills (Shotter's terms), which will enable them to operate successfully in 'messy' situations and indeterminate collaborative contexts. For this to succeed it might be helpful for language teaching to take place within the context of academic classes, and not separated off as generic language instruction. In the role of facilitators in Active Learning classrooms in the host institution teachers would also benefit from applying a 'conversational' perspective since this would enable them to attend to their students' involvement in the process aspects as well as the outcomes of group assignment tasks. In this way, the conversational perspective enables teachers to recognise language, relationships and skills as enacted, and therefore observable, aspects of 'joint action', and as such, constituting legitimate areas for their intervention as facilitators of Active Learning.

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